

THE IDENTITY OF RED-BELLIED BLACK SNAKES ON KANGAROO ISLAND

The red-bellied black snake, *Pseudechis porphyriacus*, although not reported previously from Kangaroo Island,^{1,2,3} was listed as occurring on the island based on specimens in the South Australian Museum.⁴ The authors stated, "This snake, like the Black Tiger, is jet black above and grows to about 1.5 m, but is distinguishable by its whitish belly which is usually tinged along its lateral margins with pink or crimson . . . On the island it has been seen in coastal heath on the south side, but it is not common and its usual habitat there is in doubt."¹ Two recent observations have led me to conclude that *Pseudechis porphyriacus* is not a member of the herpetofauna of Kangaroo Island.

The only specimen identified as *Pseudechis porphyriacus* in the South Australian Museum Collection (SAM R4366, Kelly Hill Caves, K.I.) is reidentified as a melanistic tiger snake of the *Notechis scutatus/ater* complex. No specimens of *Pseudechis porphyriacus* from K.I. have been located in the collections of the Australian Museum, Western Australian Museum, National Museum of Victoria, Museums & Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, Australian National Wildlife Collection or the Queensland Museum (R. Sadler, G. Storr, J. Coventry, P. Horner, J. Wombey and J. Covacevich pers. comm.).

Recent studies on variation in colour pattern of tiger snakes (*Notechis scutatus/ater* complex) of Kangaroo Island involved the collection of fresh, roadkilled specimens by rangers of the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service and local residents. Among these specimens were tiger snakes with reddish bellies (Fig. 1). Red-bellied tiger snakes are colour forms of the highly variable Kangaroo Island populations (Schwaner, in prep.). However, these are easily distinguished from *Pseudechis porphyriacus* by the shape of their subcaudal scales, in which most scales are entire, undivided plates (divided and

paired in *P. porphyriacus*). Localities for two specimens with reddish bellies are both in the Hundreds of Haines district in South Central K.I., although similarly coloured individuals could be found elsewhere on the island.

Thus red-bellied black snakes on Kangaroo Island are not *Pseudechis porphyriacus* but red-bellied, melanistic tiger snakes (*Notechis scutatus/ater* complex).

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Fig. 1. Ventral pattern of a red-bellied, melanistic tiger snake (*Notechis scutatus/ater* complex) from Kangaroo Island. The specimen (SAM R24987) is an adult female (SVL = 1115 mm) collected on a road at Ayliffe Hill (Hund. of Haines) by M. McKelvey on 3.xi.83. Light areas of the belly are Spinel Pink (Colour 108C).⁵ Note the undivided subcaudal scales.

¹Waite, E. R. (1925). Rec. S. Aust. Mus. 3, 17-32.

²Waite, E. R. (1927). Trans. R. Soc. S. Aust. 51, 326-329.

³Waite, E. R. (1929) "The Reptiles and Amphibians of South Australia." (Government Printer: Adelaide.)

⁴Houston, T. F. & Tyler, M. J. (1979) In M. J. Tyler, C. R. Twidale, & J. K. Ling, Eds. "Natural History of Kangaroo Island". (Roy. Soc. S. Aust.: Adelaide).

⁵Smith, F. B. (1981). Naturalist's color guide. Part III. (Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.: New York.)